

Creative Thesis:

‘Questers for Hire’

Exegesis:

Cognition through narrative: my quest for an empowering new story

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2022

Primary supervisor: James George

A thesis and exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing (MCW)

Centre for Creative Writing,
School of Language and Culture

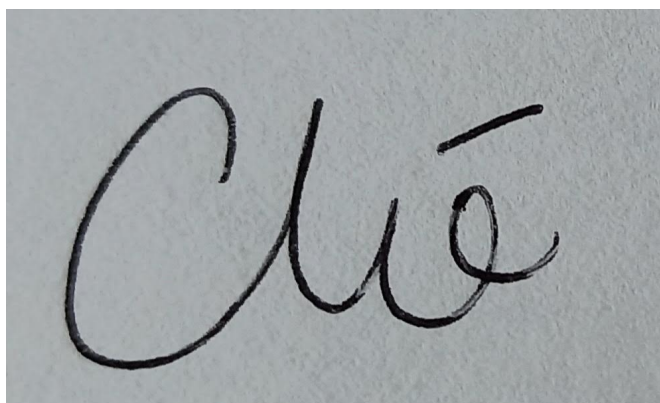
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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Candidate's signature

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light gray background. The signature is written in a cursive style, starting with a large 'C' followed by 'hé' and ending with a stylized 'Crawford'.

NAME: Ché Crawford

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Ethics Approval

This research project did not involve human participants or any other potentially contentious elements, and as such did not require approval from the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Abstract

Questers for Hire (creative element) accompanied by a critical work (exegesis), Cognition through narrative: my quest for an empowering new story. It follows the journey of Mei, a young woman who recently lost her partner to a brain tumour, dealing with the mental health fallout on her life as she navigates her grief.

The thesis asks the question of whether humans can utilise metaphor and narrative to defuse negative thought, behaviour, and feeling cycles, as well as communicate the experience to others.

The critical work (exegesis) supports the graphic novel (creative element) by exploring my personal mental illness recovery using cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and the ways in which habitual use of CBT techniques informed on my decision to narrate through graphic novel.

Exegesis

Cognition through narrative: my quest for an empowering new story

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Cognition through narrative: my quest for an empowering new story

Call to Adventure

I cannot pinpoint the beginning of my mental health decline, but I do know when it got so bad that I could not function as a normal member of society, and that was toward the end of my bachelors degree. Having no knowledge of depression, anxiety, or any inclination of what was going on inside my head, I ploughed on through, because that is what one does, and signed up to do the masters programme. Like many of the younger creative writing students, my literary world revolved firmly in the YA and not much beyond, so my every intention was a fantasy novel where the protagonist's only hurdles were familiar, comfortable fantasy tropes, and to keep my mind firmly and safely away from any truly challenging or self reflective themes.

The ailing state of my mind gave me plenty of real world hurdles that I had no skill to navigate. This escalated when, after being pushed in front of a car by a stranger on Queen Street, my mind told me that **all** crowds were unsafe and so began my seclusion from society. Unfortunately, hiding away didn't afford me the safety I expected. I became lost in a vicious cycle of thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and my YA fantasy novel morphed into a series of depressed metaphorical poetry and led ultimately to my dropping out of the programme.

My exaggerated appraisal of the event of being pushed started with 'all strangers are dangerous,' and in the following years took me far beyond. I deserved to be unsafe. I was useless, a leech on society, unable to contribute and to hold down a job, and therefore I should die. My internal narrative was harsh and convincing.

But if one narrative could drive me severely into despondency, seclusion and stagnation, I began to wonder if a new narrative could save me from it. I needed to gather about me some protective armour; tools to fight the monster. I did not know what that looked like yet, but the glimmer of hope that I could defeat this beast fueled me onward to step through the literal threshold of my house and into the world of mental health.

Because maybe I could save my world. Maybe I was The Chosen One.

A Mentor

During my isolation, I found one (albeit problematic) tool to utilise in order to escape the crushing darkness in my mind - video games. The transition between fantasy novels and video games was swift and comfortable. It was a familiar fantastical world but in video games, I got to be the hero. I was a capable warrior, I accomplished important things. I served my community of preprogrammed non-player characters by slaying monsters and bringing back gold to spend in their virtual village and help the community thrive. But I had no idea how to translate those feelings of accomplishment and importance to the real world.

In the video game world, I had magic, gold, weapons, armour, and friends. In the real world, I had nothing. The real world also had no reset button. If I mucked up, I could not go back to a previous save point. The real world had real consequences which meant real fear.

At the time, conversation around mental health was becoming more prominent. I first became familiar with the term ‘mental health’ thanks to television advertisements featuring a rugby player named John Kirwan, urging people to get help. It took time to sink in. ‘Getting help,’ was not something my family did. Generations of stoic family culture meant the only thing I was supposed to get was ‘over it.’

But as I stood one day on the edge of the road contemplating if the pain of being hit by a bus would outweigh the pain I was feeling in my head, it occurred to me that I no longer cared what my family did or thought. In all honesty, I did not care about anything. So, what was the harm in asking for help like John Kirwan suggested? Maybe I would end up back here and take that step in front of a bus or a train, or maybe things would get better. It was worth the risk.

I wish I could say that after that choice had been made, getting help was as easy. Education around mental health was only beginning so the general practitioners I saw did not take my request seriously, having not had education around mental health themselves. I ended up shopping through various free therapy services, trying different types. I had some success with talking therapy, but it was not until several years later when I engaged the services of a doctoral student at Massey University that I had any real progress.

I had finally found the mighty sword and protective armour I so desired, and it came in the form of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

Transformation

‘Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), as developed by A.T. Beck and others, is built on the assumption that thinking processes both influence and are influenced by emotional and behavioural

responses to many different psychological problems. Therapy therefore aims to modify cognitive, emotional and behavioural processes in an experimental way to test whether modification has positive effects on the client's difficulties' (Wills with Sanders, 2013, p. 3).

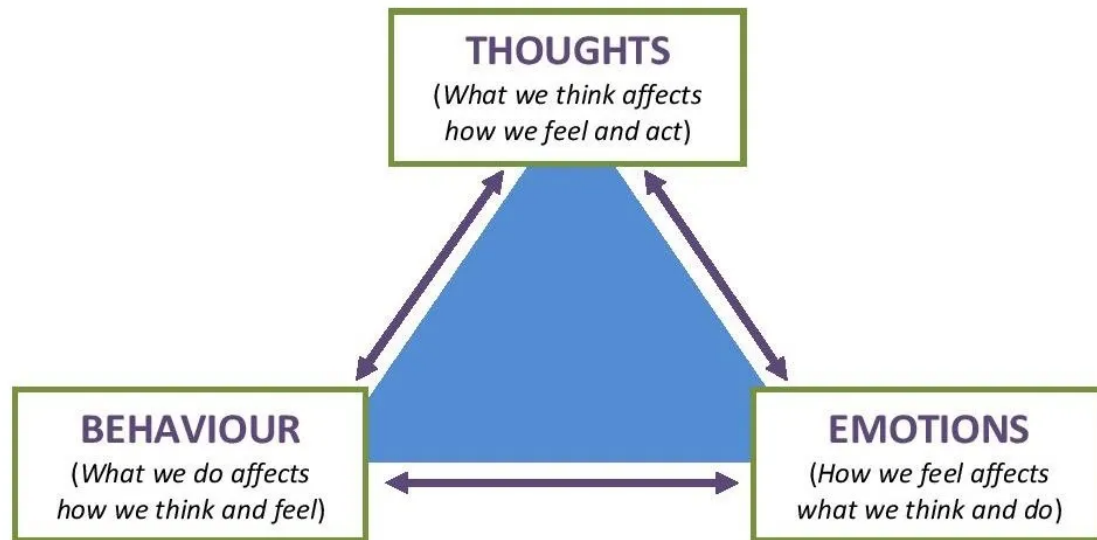
The separation of cognitive, emotional and behavioural processes has been a positive and life altering way of looking at life.

In my 'depressed metaphorical poetry' phase, I likened suffering depression to falling down an inescapable abyss. 'The darkness and fog cloud all vision and dream' (Crawford, 2013). Having talked about depression extensively now with friends and family, I have found it interesting that many people feel the need to use metaphor and simile to explain their mental health. Depression has been described to me as a potato sack over a head, so they can still see and go about life, but it is fuzzy and difficult. It has also been described as being trapped inside a silent, white bubble. Everything outside the bubble is noisy, colourful and cheerful but they cannot see, touch, or hear the outside and are at risk of being blown away.

I believe my need to use metaphor to explain the continuous internal spiral my life had become was because everything inside was incomprehensible to me at the time. My mind was a mess of knotted wool that I did not have the skills to untangle until CBT. Talking therapy had highlighted some of what I had been feeling, but CBT went beyond that to look at the narrative in my head i.e. my thoughts, and then to my resulting behaviour. Most importantly, it equipped me with the tools to do something about it myself.

Revelation

There are numerous exercises that can be utilised from CBT to navigate difficulties. I employ several of these throughout my novel for the characters, such as grounding and mindfulness. The tool that first made a significant impact in my own life and that I still make use of today, is the cognitive triangle featured in Figure 1.

Figure 1*The Cognitive Triangle*

(The Mindful Living Centre, 2020).

CBT is based around the idea that our thoughts, emotions and behaviour all influence each other and as such, we can become stuck in thought-emotion cycles.

When I was pushed by a stranger, my appraisal was that my domain was under threat, which led me to feel the emotions of fear and anxiety. In response to those feelings, my behaviour was to flee and to hide. This followed by more thoughts of strangers being dangerous, and a continuation of withdrawing and feeling anxious, thus being trapped in a cycle.

When the protagonist of my novel, Mei, loses her partner Gwen, she has the thought that her friends are only her friends because she met them through Gwen, that they could not possibly like her for her, and this leads to sadness, anxiety and withdrawal.

When one of Mei's own comic book characters Yema is rejected from the Troll Tribe by a family member, Yema struggles with thinking she has no worth, being neither human nor troll, that she has no identity and no place to belong. She feels angry, betrayed and hurt. She behaves by storming out of rooms, spending time isolated from her friends, and lashing out in anger, which only further proves to herself that she is not worth loving or having around.

The incredible power of the cognitive triangle is that if we choose to change one small thing in any of the corners, it would impact the other two, and what feels like a negative thought-emotion cycle could be turned into a positive one.

Having realised that I was missing a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from my life, the one that manageable sized video game quests so readily gave me, I clung to this triangle. Doing so facilitated the untangling of my mind and guided the setting of small achievable goals. I chose to dub these goals as ‘quests,’ because quests are an outward journey, and felt obtainable, familiar and exciting.

Feeling better was an impossibly vague task. Years of battling depression and anxiety had proven that. But choosing to tackle a corner, to change a behaviour or a thought, was in the realm of my capability. I perhaps could not throw a party, but I (and Mei) could text a friend. I might not be able to commit to joining a gym, but I could set a quest to walk to the end of the driveway. I could challenge my thoughts and appraisals, my internal narration of life. ‘Thank you for warning me amygdala but I’m not actually in danger right now.’

And I made sure to give myself the quest reward when I had completed it, even if that reward was just the act ticking my effort off a to-do list.

I gained cognition through the new narratives I chose to tell myself. ‘I have the power to accomplish small things. I deserve to live. I am loved.’

The battle for wellbeing became achievable.

Atonement

A key theme that runs through my mental health metaphors, those of my friends, and thus in my graphic novel, is the theme of isolation or separation. I show this in *Questers for Hire* among several of the character’s arcs. Mei isolates herself to recover from grief. Cassie isolates out of fear of strangers or her lack of self worth. Yema withdraws as she spirals into depressive thought-emotion cycles.

When my mental health declined and began to dominate my life, I was not sequestered due to lack of friends or family. I even married a wonderful and supportive partner during this time. But I set myself apart from my community because of my internal narrative.

When I could not prevent myself from crying in the middle of a work day and was sent home with a stern warning, I told myself that I was failing my housemates who made up my rent, that they deserved better than I could give.

When I was unable to leave the house for grocery shopping, my mind told me I was failing my husband, who had taken over earning all of our income, cooking our meals, doing our washing. I could

not do this one small thing to contribute to our combined life. He deserved a better wife, a better life and I was in the way.

The more I felt like I had nothing to offer, the more I withdrew from my friends, regardless of how they felt about it. Even if they did not realise it, my thoughts reiterated repeatedly that I was protecting them by keeping such a ‘useless, disgusting, failure of a person,’ away from their lives.

In hindsight, I hurt a lot of people I love. They felt abandoned and ignored when I could not communicate why I was behaving that way. I have some forgiveness for myself because mental illness is an illness. But had self care and mental health strategies been woven into the literature I absorbed as a young person, I believe the large portion of the life I lost to negative thought-emotion cycles would have been significantly shorter.

‘Fear, ignorance, dependence and irresponsibility must die to make way for the birth of love, wisdom, interdependence and responsibility’ (*Hero’s Journey - Growth & Change At*, 2022).

I now choose to be a part of mental health conversation. This is my atonement, my responsibility, and while the connotations of those words can weigh heavy, I find freedom in giving purpose and value to everything I suffered and embrace this quest heartily. I do not **have** to share my journey or add to conversation, I **get** to.

Return

To encourage self-compassion, therapists compared mental illness to the breaking of a leg. Most people understand that broken legs require medical attention and time to heal. Acknowledging depression as an illness allowed me grace but I also imagined that traversing recovery would be linear. At one end of this line I was a sick person, ailed with a broken leg, a jumbled mind. At the other I was healed, cast removed and running, mostly free from complications or ongoing consequences, as long as I was careful.

I could not have been more wrong. Peck talks about the ongoing problem of distinguishing what we are and are not responsible for, for those of us that come to therapy as a self-blaming neurotic. ‘It is never completely solved; for the entirety of our lives we must continually assess and reassess where our responsibilities lie in the ever changing course of events’ (2012, p. 37). My mind’s natural inclination could always be to assume that I am at fault, that I have no worth, and that I am not good enough. I could always need to work on changing or arguing that narrative. There is no ‘cured,’ but there is learning to employ strategies to cope, navigate, and shift the story.

Having spent significant time lost in a vivid internal world, one of the best approaches to the continual battling of my negative narrative is to externalise it. For much of my life, I could not name my feelings so drawing expression and body language comes more naturally and I knew upon entering the

masters programme for a second time, there would be no purely text based novel. If I wanted to finish my degree, to go forth into contributing to the world of mental health conversation with a finishable project, my creative thesis needed to be a graphic novel.

Graphic Novel/Comic

Eisner defines comics with a two world definition - 'sequential art' (1985).

McCloud expands on this definition, as 'images juxtaposed in deliberate sequence in order to convey an idea and/or an aesthetic response' (1993, p. 7). Neither touch on words as a contributing factor to what makes a comic.

Kuzle goes beyond these two definitions and includes words, technology and topic in his, suggesting that items like aeroplane safety illustrations would not be comic based on its topic (1973).

For me, comic centres on narrative and how I want to communicate mine, whether that be a safety manual or 250 odd pages of mental health driven story. As McCloud so beautifully expresses, 'words and pictures are like partners in a dance and each one takes turns leading' (1993).

Sometimes I use only illustration, such as in figure 2, sometimes only text like figure 3. More often than not, I utilise both to compliment each other such as demonstrated in figure 4.

Figure 2

Image only panel from part 4 - Grief

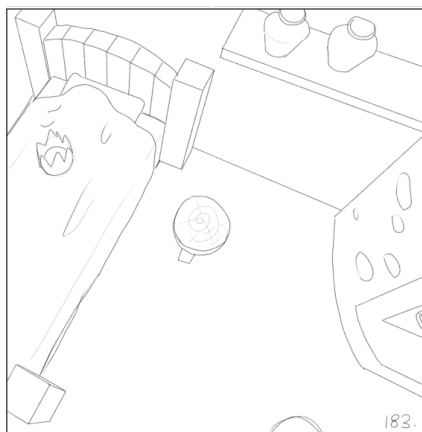


Figure 3

Text only panel from part 4 - Grief



Figure 4

Panel using text and image from part 4 - Grief



As tightly woven, interweaving dance partners, my process is to start with the story in whatever form it comes to me. Often as a mix of both images and text, I collect notes and sketches around my wall until I feel comfortable and familiar with the world and my intentions in it. Figures 5, 6, and 7 are examples of my earliest planning.

Figure 5

Original 'quester' character designs

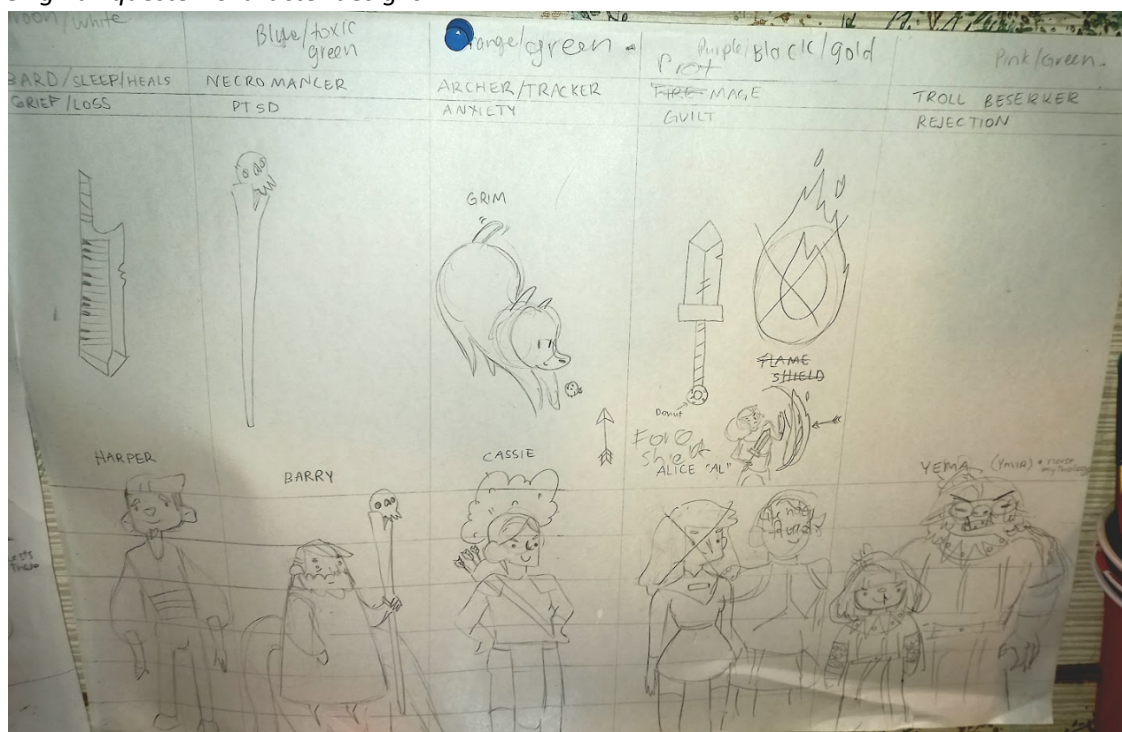
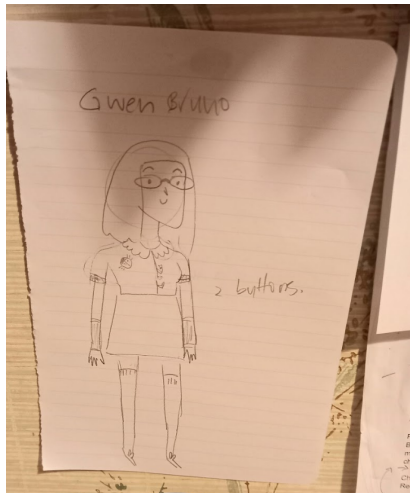
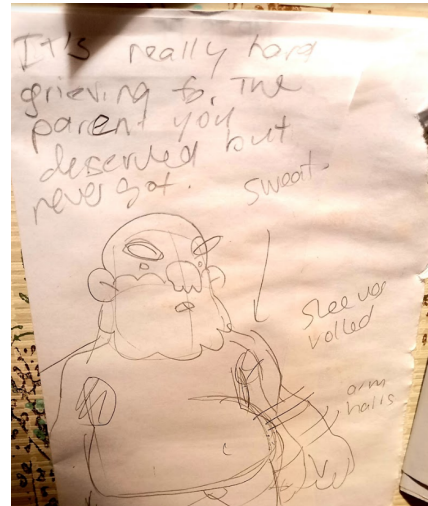


Figure 6*Gwen Bruno's design***Figure 7***Barry's Dad's design with a note on parents*

Note. Figures 5, 6, & 7 are photographs from my studio wall and have been there for the last three years.

I then break my intentions down into achievable ‘quest’ chunks; script, thumbnails, sketch, line art, colour, shading, effects, and text.

The Script

For my scripting stage, I had an overarching story of the protagonist, Mei, working through the grief of losing her partner, Gwen, to cancer. I broke the story down into five parts that focused on different uncomfortable feelings and behaviours Mei was battling; anxiety, rejection, intrusive memories (ptsd), grief, and guilt. These are things I also battle, so while I used Mei to explore my own internal narrative, Mei used her own characters to do the same thing. Together we tackled tough, uncomfortable thoughts, feelings and behaviours. As she rewrote her story, I rewrote mine.

For each part, I sandwiched her comic with scenes of therapy that mirrored my own CBT experience. It was important that Mei introduced the hurdle, explored rewriting it via her comic, then showed progress in the second wrap-up therapy scene. I wanted to illustrate that she was managing better but was not completely ‘healed’ because my own healing has not been linear and will require ongoing maintenance.

I then roughly scripted each part to help with the pacing of thumbnails, such as figure 8’s example of Mei’s ‘guilt’ character Al, and Al’s mum.

Figure 8

A section of script from part 5 - guilt

They embrace, Al's mum directs others to take charge and then gives Al a tray of tea and cookies and leads them out to a private garden
 "Are we allowed to be here, mum?"
 Of course
 Dishes Al tea
 Let me serve you mum
 Hush, let me dote on my child
 Al accepts the tea and the cookie
 So tell me, what amazing adventures have you been up to?

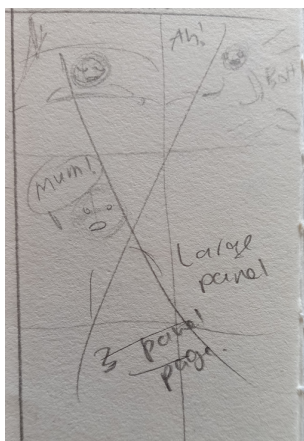
Thumbnails

I am most conscious of the pace of the story during the thumbnailing stage. Here is where I navigate the emotional beats of the story and choose composition that supports the visual storytelling, 'making physical the underlying emotions of a scene (the subtext)' (Lancaster, 2019).

If I feel the scene's pace needs to be slower, to linger over the subtext of Al's guilt and shame, I would choose either to have multiple panels of the character barely moving, or I would have a larger panel that takes the reader's eye longer to traverse, such as the one used in figures 9 and 10, when Al wakes from their nightmare.

Figure 9

The thumbnail

**Figure 10**

The sketch



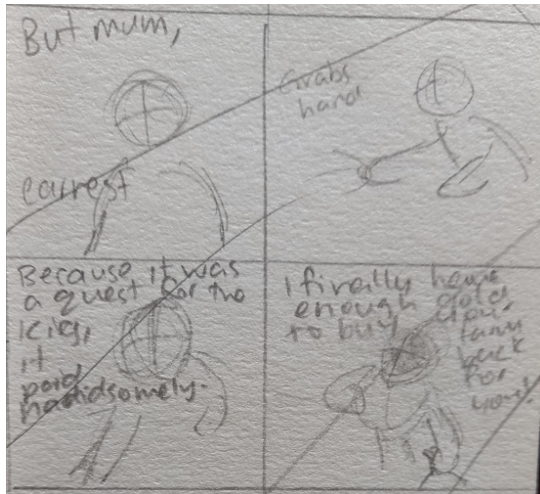
Note. Figures 9 & 10 are taken from part 5 - guilt.

The large intimate panel encourages the reader to linger in the emotions of the scene.

If I want the pace to quicken, to have Al's excitement supported visually, I use smaller rapid panels where each demonstrates significant change or chunks of text such as in figure 11.

Figure 11

Thumbnails of Al and their mum talking in the garden taken from part 5 - guilt



Al's quick changes from sitting, to lunging across the table, to reaching below for the coins, visually supports the subtext of their excitement at being able to 'free' their mother and elevate their personal guilt.

Thumbnailing is also where I start to make use of composition because the size of the 'shot' determines the levels of intimacy and reinforces the psychology of a scene.

Mei's therapy scenes were the most interesting to draw and I look forward to a second draft where I can amplify my choices in panel framing to support her emotional journey. In these therapy scenes, I use 'normal' framed panels for the therapist. The psychological point of view in a 'normal' panel is the perspective of a person's single eye, so does not include peripheral vision. 'Use to establish normal behaviour' (Lancaster, 2019, p. 58). I like this shot for the therapist because it works in juxtaposition to Mei. Where the therapist is calm, composed, and 'normal,' Mei is often anxious, sad, and angry.

For Mei, I use many subjective panels. I want to place the reader inside her emotional struggles. I use medium distanced drawings of Mei and the therapist to establish normal conversation distance, and close drawings of Mei on her own to get in her personal and emotional space.

Sketches

In the sketching phase, I focus on blocking the subtext. I want the thoughts and feelings of the characters to manifest in their physical behaviour and expression. Not unlike the cognitive triangle, the sketch phase for me separates thoughts, feelings, and behaviour into dialogue, expression, and body language which also summarises why graphic storytelling works better for my brain than purely text based narrative.

Truffaut explains Hitchcock's key rules of pure 'cinema' filmmaking.

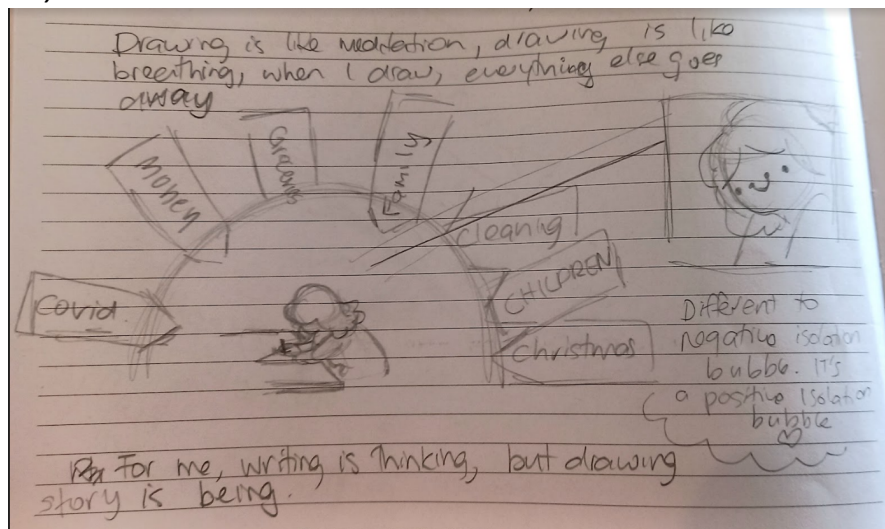
1. 'Whatever is said instead of being shown is lost upon the viewer' (1985).

I suspect I overuse dialogue, especially in the therapy scenes. There's an abundance of 'tell' that might be able to be cut down in future drafts, but for the sketching phase I have tried to be conscious of reinforcing the dialogue through 'showing' the characters actions and expressions. My eventual goal is that if I strip away the dialogue (not that I intend to), the reader will still be able to follow the story through the blocking and composition.

Sketching has been the most time consuming phase, but has been the most cathartic for me. When trying to self analyse why I had to include drawings in my storytelling, figure 12 is what came out.

Figure 12

Why I love to draw



Note. I have commented that drawing creates an isolation bubble for me that is different from mental illness. Where mental illness creates a barrier from my community without my permission, drawing creates an 'on purpose' zone of peace and enjoyment.

During sketching, the blocking happens instinctively for me. I feel the characters with my whole being, lose myself in the story, the feelings, and manifest it on the page without being very conscious of it. But later when I pull back, I become aware of the visual iconography I had been adding to the images and intend to build upon them in a second draft.

Salisbury and Styles state that ‘individuality exists based on age, gender, and background but as human beings like any other, there also exists some form of emotional homogeneity’ (2012, p. 123). Despite my work being of personal themes, I hope it will have universal appeal because emotionally it includes basic elements that all humans share.

When Mei clenches her fists or grips her knees, viewers will unconsciously empathise with the physical expression of feeling. Her body language of behaviours like clenching, balling up, and gripping, like in figure 13, tells the reader what she is unable to express with words because of its overwhelming nature - that her grief is all consuming.

Figure 13

A section of Mei's therapy from part 4 - grief



When she smiles while talking about a hurdle in her life similar to figure 14, the reader will recognise the coping mechanism, even if the reason for masking her real emotions is not a hurdle they themselves have experienced.

Figure 14

The therapist character seeing through Mei's humour mask



What readers might lack in life experiences, they can still take part in sharing because they are fellow beings who can think and reason. The blocking of body language, behaviour, and expression allows them to pick up on the subtext.

I visually represented Mei's progress of learning coping mechanisms by equipping her with tokens reflecting her own comic characters, their hurdles, and what writing them has brought to her life. I started this by giving her a new piece of clothing in the wrap-up therapy scene of each chapter. She had a hair tie after the Cassie/anxiety story to represent the bravery she had found. Mei wore a bracelet similar to Yema from the rejection chapter. This is to represent her self worth and that she was not alone, that she has a chosen family thanks to Gwen's parents. In a second draft I will be changing these symbols from clothing items to a steadily expanding sleeve of tattoos, something I have been doing for myself. That way, no matter where in life she goes, Mei will have a visual reminder of all she is capable of getting through because of all she already has. The tattoos will be a kind of armour to represent the skills we have both learned to protect and guide us through hardships going forward.

Figure 15

A photograph of personal tattoo featuring a sunflower and ladybug



Figure 15 is one of my personal tattoos of a sunflower to represent looking for the positives in life, to ‘always face the sun,’ and a (difficult to see in the photo) ladybug to remind myself that even small steps are a step forward. Small steps are enough. These tattoos help me with mindfulness, bringing me sharply back into the present when I lose myself internally to fear, sadness, and anxiety. Because of their helpfulness to me, I will give something similar to Mei but personal to her journey; a bow or a dog for the anxiety chapter, a keytar or some music notes for the grief chapter and so on. These will become symbols or icons of the tools she acquired during her recovery to utilise going forward and maintain lifelong mental wellness.

Colour

I have expressed that the nature of mental illness for me has at times been one I could not put into words. I would like for my graphic novel to communicate this experience, to be an intoxicating environment of sensations. Kandisky said that ‘colour is a means of exerting direct influence upon the soul’ (2020). Colours can express a dominant mood, objects and characters take on added significance, and the form of the art sends effective subliminal messages supporting the emotion.

I have looked at several books that surround the topics of death and sadness. Wolf Erlbruch's (2008) *Duck, Death and the Tulip* follows Duck as he nears the end of his life and becomes aware of Death. The story features a sparse white background and the characters have very little colour. One of the only uses of warm colour is when Death gently places a black tulip on Duck and 'laid her gently on the water and nudged her on her way' (Erlbruch, W., 2008).

Clement created a visual analysis of the book and describes Death's actions 'when he realises Duck has died to include the black tulip, which is a known farewell to someone dear' (2013). The story as a whole can be read as one where Death and Duck become familiar and no longer fear each other with the coloured black tulip emphasising the dearness of Duck to Death. I like the sparseness of colour in this story. When colour is added, it is used to add significance.

While I have not yet had time to colour my novel, sparseness of colour is something I would like to utilise in Mei's therapy scenes. I want her world to feel bland, bleak, and grey to reflect her depressed state of mind. As she progresses through therapy, I intend to introduce colour to amplify the visualisation of her healing. The colour might come through first in her tattoo, then on the people and items that are most significant to her. I want to highlight the parts of her life that support and encourage her to live mindfully in the present.

The one item that will always have colour will be her ladybird badge. This is to emphasise her heartbreak and connection with Gwen, as well as her goal for therapy; to take small steps forward toward grieving, coping, and finding purpose and direction.

I want the hospital scene in the first chapter to be stark in colour, supporting the body language of the patients to communicate the subtext of the scene. I repeat the hospital scene at the end of the novel with a much less intimidating reception and Mei's body language showing her to be more at ease in the familiar environment. I would like to use warm colours in the second hospital scene to encourage readers to view therapy as a safe, welcome place that can be healing. The brightest colours of Mei's story will be used as Mei leaves the hospital, facing toward the right to symbolise a journey forwards, both colour and direction working in tandem to communicate hope.

In contrast to Mei's desolate colours, I intend her fictional world to be bright and saturated. I want to use this difference for two purposes. One is to show how disconnected from the real world mental illness can cause a person to feel. The other is to show how fantasy can be a creative outlet for the brain. It can be new and exciting, 'fosters their belief in possibility. This often results in children who are hopeful and more optimistic' (Gockman, C. 2018). Although in my personal experience, not just children. There is real power in the narrative we tell ourselves and I want Mei's stories to be bright and attention grabbing to illustrate our ability to retrain our brains away from the negative and toward the positive.

Because I shift between worlds and timelines frequently in my graphic novel, colour will help indicate this to the reader. When Mei's comic moves from present time back to memories of childhood, I could use foggy or faded colours to suggest their remembering. A change in colour will help the reader move between Mei's real life and her fictional comic.

Each of Mei's characters will have a colour palette that helps make them easily identifiable. 'Different cultures associate different meanings to colour. For example, grey white can be used to represent funeral ceremonies in China, but represents purity and relates to marriage in Christian countries' (Yikun & Zhao, 2015, p. 13). I originally chose colour palettes for Mei's characters that are based on my experiences and culture. Barry, representing intrusive memories, was given blue and toxic green, shown in figure 16.

Figure 16

Coloured Barry, the character representing intrusive memory



The stormy blue touches represent fear, secrets, and depression. The toxic green was to illustrate the unnaturalness of his power necromancy. I chose necromancy because that is the ability to bring back the dead. PTSD/intrusive memories are similar in that they forcibly revive parts of life that might be irrelevant to the present moment.

But I am conscious that these chosen colours and what they represent to me might not universally translate. For the people who do not associate blue and green with the reasons I chose them, I hope they will come to see them as a reflection of Barry's story during the course of their reading it. The combination of those colours, Barry's design, and his character, will become a symbol of intrusive memory and the grounding technique Barry, Mei and myself use to navigate our experiences with it.

Text

I know that for some comics, one person can be responsible for the speech bubbles and text that they are a specialist in that alone. I have much to learn about lettering.

My goal for the speech bubble and text stage of my graphic novel is to avoid the reading experience being choppy, interrupted, and unnatural. When letterforms are 'drawn by the same hand that draws the art, the two elements fit together seamlessly. The reader is able to "hear" the dialogue as if it's spoken by the characters' (Abel & Madden, 2008, p. 88).

One of my favourite experiences reading a comic where the letters and art work as one, is when I read *Nimona* (Stevenson, 2016). The protagonist, Nimona, is confident, snarky, and fun. She comes into a world of characters who are not necessarily happy, but are comfortable where they are placed and the role that they play. Nimona shakes things up.

Stevenson hand-lettered the entire graphic novel himself and the style of the font works in conjunction with the illustrations to communicate the narrative seamlessly, such as in figure 17. When I read the three panels in figure 17, I feel Nimona's chaotic personality and hear Lord Ballister's slightly haughty tones.

Figure 17

A series of panels featuring Nimona, the protagonist, and her boss, Lord Ballister playing monopoly.



(Stevenson, 2016)

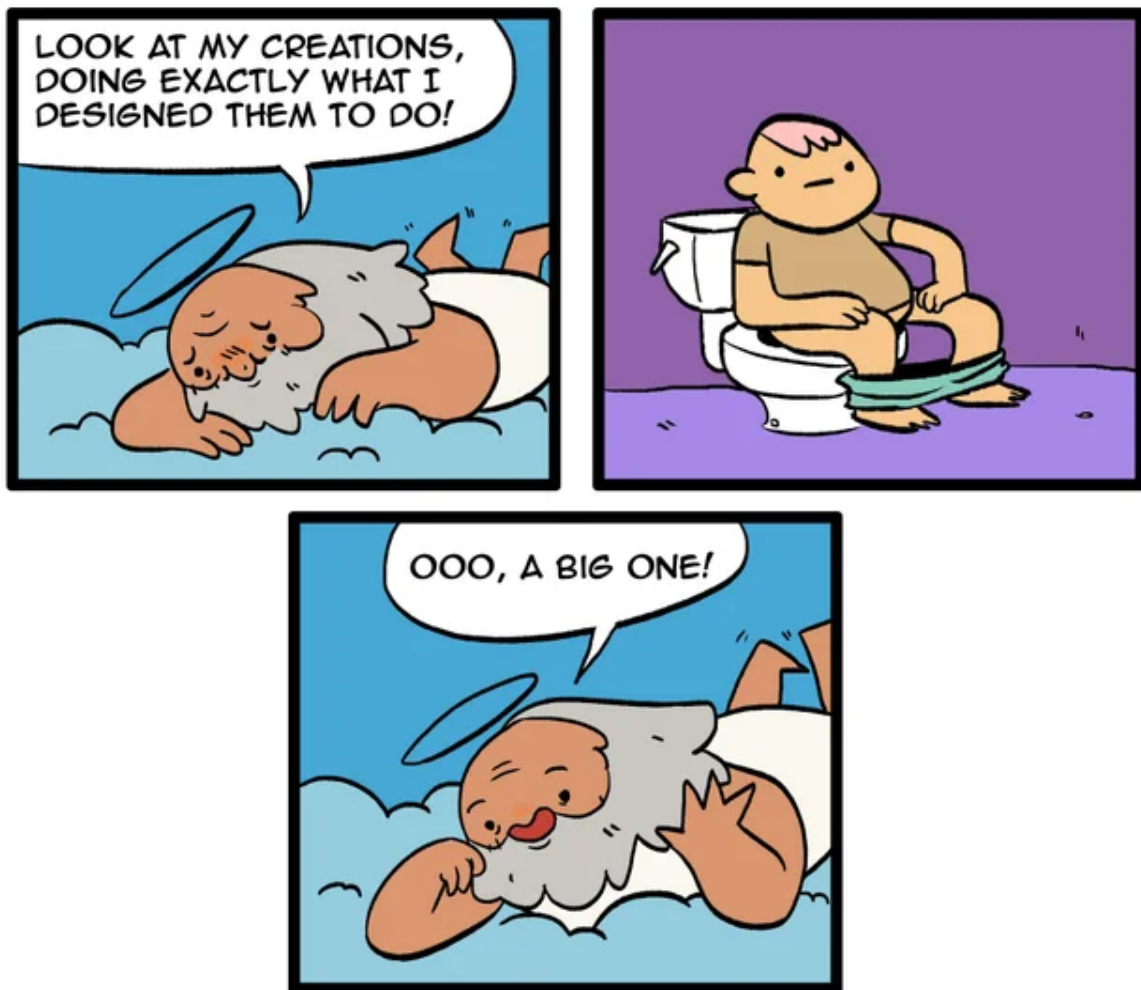
My personal handwriting is not currently appropriate for comics based purely on readability. I need time to develop a style that fits with my novel and serves to add to the reading experience instead of interrupt. A future goal is to make a computer font of my own lettering to use when I come to text *Questers for Hire*.

I have, in the past, primarily existed in the world of three/four-panel webcomics. For those, I tend to haphazardly place on speech bubbles and choose various fonts to ‘have a go with.’ My earliest comics utilised typical manga or comic fonts that I was most familiar with growing up, such as the one I used in figure 18.

I have since settled into a font that is slightly more hand-written in appearance, illustrated in figure 19.

Figure 18

One of my first digital comics 'Doing God's Work.'



(Crawford, 2020)

Note. The font in 'Doing God's Work' feels loud and aggressive to me. If I redid the comic, I would try to choose a font that amplified God's jolly disposition.

Figure 19

Home

(Crawford, 2020)

Both font choices in figures 18 & 19 are in all upper case letters which was a previously unconscious choice based on my reading of traditional comic books. I have since learned traditional comics were originally lettered in all capitals because ‘editors realised they could fit more text on the page that way’ (Abel & Madden, 2008, p. 89) which was an important consideration when printing. Because all capitalised letters can look uniform and dense, I worry that my larger blocks of text will be difficult to read and so I intend to explore lettering options that have both upper and lower-case letters, hoping to make the dialogue easier for the eye to differentiate. I have the luxury of doing this as printing is now more affordable as technology has progressed, but even so, I could publish purely digitally on a platform

such as WebToon and never need to worry or consider the publishing costs beyond the use of my computer.

Another concern when I come to the text stage of my comic, is making sure the placements of the speech bubbles and the text within will be in the correct spots for the comic to be read as I intend. Since western cultures read from left to right, top to bottom, it is important the speech bubbles follow this pattern so the reader follows the dialogue in the correct order. When I can, I place the first speaker in the panel on the left side unless it breaks the continuity. If the first speaker cannot be on the left, then the speech bubble will be at the top, and the second speaker's bubble will be placed lower, such as in this panel in figure 20.

Figure 20

A panel from my 2022 'Call to Action' competition entry - 'This Lady'



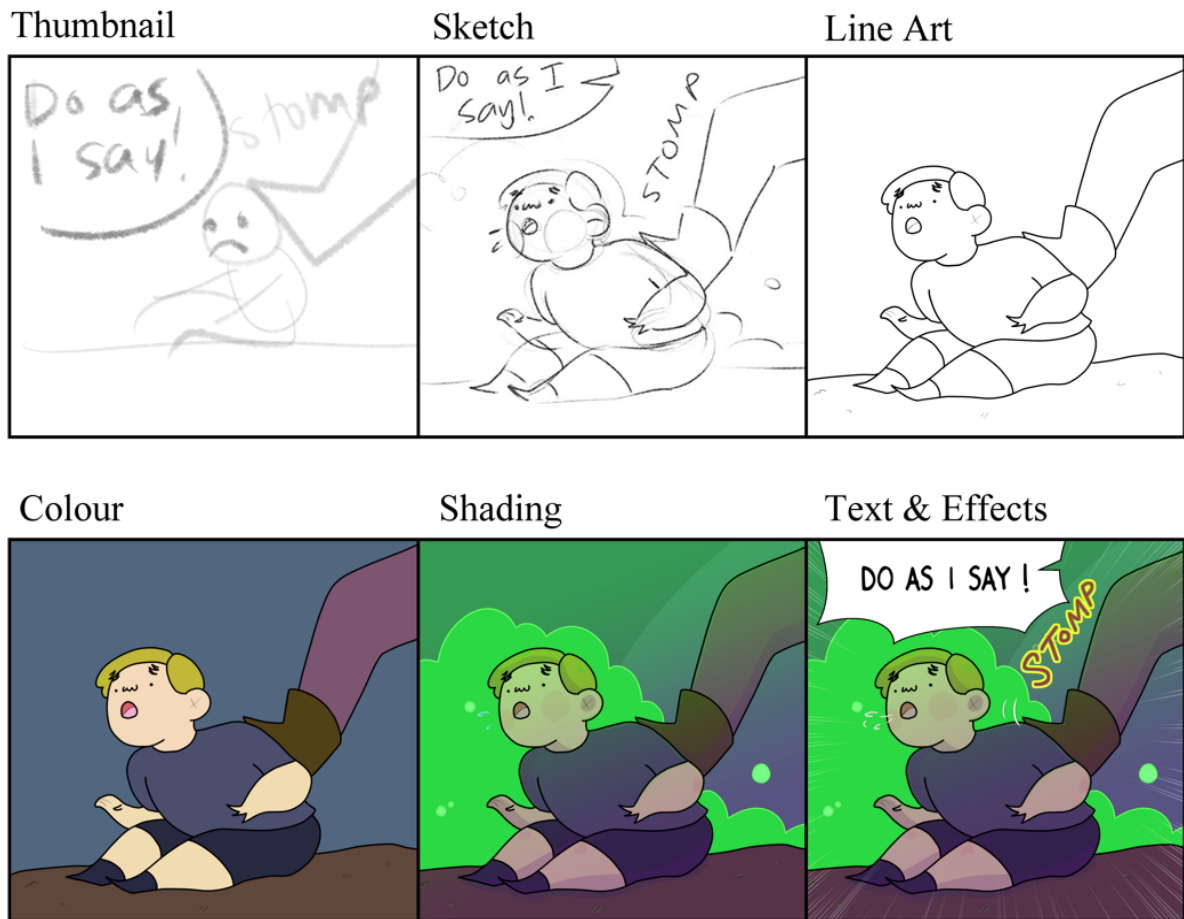
(Crawford, 2022)

Whatever my choices end up being for font and bubble style, I intend for them to pair well with the story and characters to create a seamless reading experience.

Each of these development stages will come together, such in figure 21, supporting the narrative to create an immersive experience for the reader.

Figure 21

An example of the evolution from thumbnail to finish.



Note. The example panel is from 'Part 3 - Intrusive Memory.' It features a panel from Barry's flashback to his childhood, where his father abused him and forced him to raise the dead. This panel was chosen as an example because as well as an illustration, it featured a speech bubble, dialogue, and the onomatopoeic effects of the father's physical actions so could be used to illustrate every step I take in finishing a panel.

Going Forward

The process of examining mental health through metaphor has been interesting for me and one I would like to explore with illustration. I intend to continue developing 'Questers for Hire' during a PhD and bring it to completion. I would also accompany my graphic novel with a secondary work which could stand in conjunction with 'Questers for Hire' or be stand alone. The secondary work will be a series of shorter mental health themed comics inspired by interviews, should I get approval via the ethics board.

Metaphor is so often used to illustrate ideas to others but I have found it noteworthy how metaphor can help make sense of mental health on a personal level and allow sufferers to address their internal narratives.

I first made sense of mental illness by picturing the depression I suffered as being stuck down an inescapable abyss of darkness (Crawford, 2013). As I mentioned under Transformation, friends have described their journeys to me in various ways to illustrate separation from community and society, such as sacks over their face or being stuck in a bubble.

I used my metaphor to explain what was going on in my head to my doctor because at the time I had no other words to communicate the experience. Depression and anxiety were not just a feeling. They were not just a thought or my physical actions. The experience was a combined accumulation of all the ways humans live and experience life that I could not detangle to share.

While I have the knowledge and scope to now communicate in words, visual communication adds another layer of depth and is a closer representation of what is going on internally for those suffering from mental illness. It would be fascinating to interview volunteers and develop their metaphors into poetical graphic narratives that serve both to inform on a personal level and to share with others. This will hopefully be my next ‘quest.’

Quest Complete

My current quest for an empowering new story has been a years-long non-linear process. I have learned that there is no defeating the beast but there is taming it, and for me that is a successful quest completion story. I have mimicked my journey in Mei’s narrative and her questers’ narratives, albeit with different triggers. I have demonstrated that while life brings different hardships to different people, there is kinship in the emotional aspects and we can empathise, respect, and learn from one another.

Because I now habitually break down mental health struggles into the cognitive triangle/achievable quests, comic has proven to be an ideal story-telling format for me. The process of idea, to script, to thumbnails, sketch, lines, colour, and text has taken my thesis from being overwhelmingly impossible to exciting and achievable.

I have been able to write Mei’s story. Doing so has reinforced the cognitive behaviour therapy techniques I learned for myself, taking suggested exercises like grounding and diffusion, and turning them into lifelong habits. My internal narrative has gone from hopeless to hopeful.

I am equipped. I am empowered. I will share my journey, reach out to others who struggle, and to go forth knowing that I **can** cope with life. **I can thrive.**

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